Storytelling makes a difference

ETHNICITY IN THE MEDIA

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Based on available research findings, the author explores how the portrayal of stigmatized groups and the perpetuation of stereotypes in fictional stories has an influence on how we make sense of the world.

When it comes to understanding the role of television in children's minds, almost anyone you speak with will have an opinion. It can be confusing to know what's been backed up by research and what hasn't. In this essay, we explore how fiction has an influence on how we make sense of the world, how that happens, and what the consequences are.

Research has documented the stories we tell about groups that have traditionally been stigmatized such as non-Whites, females and the LGBTQ+[1] community (Dines et al., 2017). There are many studies that demonstrate the pervasiveness of racial, gender and sexual orientation stereotypes in the media, although there is some evidence that it is getting better and that it differs by the group in question. There is also evidence that exposure to negative stereotypes can support discrimination against the target group. The good news is that positive depictions of social groups such as race can also have positive effects on the viewer (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2017).

The truth is that story is and has always been influential. We know this intuitively because we believe it is important to read stories to our children. There is specific historical evidence of people changing their minds about an important social issue based on seeing a persuasive film or television show. For example, US President Ronald Regan admitted that the film *The Day After*, about nuclear destruction, influenced his policy decisions. The film *Philadelphia* changed minds about the AIDS crisis in America. Numerous stories exist of people's hearts and minds being moved by things they have watched on the screen.[2]

In addition to individuals' stories about how a film or television program changed them, we also have research evidence that this works on the group level as well. For instance, in one study, exposure to stereotypical African American fictional characters versus exposure to African American leaders lead to very different outcomes. Those who saw the negative stereotypes were less likely to back a Black political candidate than a White candidate with the same credentials, while those who saw the progressive images were more likely to back the Black than the White political candidate (Dill & Burgess, 2012).

The stories we tell about race on television should be taken seriously because ultimately, they will play a role in how children understand ethnicity. Simply put, research evidence tells us that if we tell stories that confirm or support racial stereotypes in the media, there will be negative consequences. If we tell stories that challenge racial prejudice and portray members of stigmatized groups in ways that humanize them, there will be positive consequences. There are a number of reasons why this is true which will be presented hereinafter.

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Ill. 1: The movie *Black Panther* has been seen by many critics as a watershed moment in the cultural understanding of race

BLACK PANTHER

The film *Black Panther* (Ill. 1) has made headlines around the world because it has been seen by many as a watershed moment in the cultural understanding of race (Abdul-Jabbar, 2018; Agbabiaka, 2018; Faithful, 2018; White, 2018). In a world where the headlines offer grim news about the world of race relations, our storytellers can give us a more progressive vision of the future.

When African-American basketball icon Kareem Abdul-Jabbar interviewed director Ryan Coogler for the *Hollywood Reporter*, Abdul-Jabbar wrote of the release of *Black Panther*: "It's a little like witnessing the unveiling of an enormous statue on the public square — with the public square being the world — of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela dressed in bright dashikis." (Abdul-Jabbar, 2018) In his essay, "Dark of the World, Shine on Us: The Redemption of Blackness in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*," scholar George Faithful writes, "Art empowers. (…) Superhero films can be such art. In their social function, they can even play the role of mythology." (Faithful, 2018, p. 304)

This is not new. In the 1960s, when the television show *Star Trek* presented us with a group of officers piloting a space ship, the crew of the ship included men and women and people of color working side by side. This was a world where a Black woman was an essential and trusted member of the crew. In fact, the Black actress who played the role got the attention of Martin Luther King Jr., who told her that she was a role model for Black children and that it was important for her to stay on the show for this reason (Dill-Shackleford, 2016). Flash forward to today. The professional wisdom for so long had been that predominantly-White audiences wouldn't react well if they saw heroes who weren't White. Similarly, Hollywood heroes have long been much more likely to be male than female. Then, DC Comics' *Wonder Woman* surprised a lot of industry professionals (though some were not surprised) by breaking box office records and garnering great enthusiasm. *Wonder Woman* won big for its director Patty Jenkins, when *Wonder Woman* became the highest grossing female-directed film in history. What's more, according to *Vanity Fair*, *Wonder Woman* outdid DC's stable of male superheroes like *Superman* and *Batman* (Stefansky, 2017). The next year, the film *Black Panther* hit the screens with a predominantly-Black cast and broke records as well. Far from being rejected by White and other non-Black viewers, *Black Panther* made the history books around the world for box office figures.

In this climate, my colleagues and I (Dill-Shackleford, Drake, Gonzalez-Velazquez, Vinney & Keller, 2018) wanted to understand how youth, particularly youth of color, reacted to the film. We worked in collaboration with an American non-profit educational program called LEAD[3]. LEAD, standing for Leadership, Education and Development, works with a group of youth, primarily youth of color, who are good students, to train them and increase the odds of their acceptance at excellent universities. They have a 99% success rate. Our research team sent out researchers to a number of universities where LEAD summer programs were taking place. For example, I traveled to Duke University in Durham, NC, USA, where students completed our surveys on their phones. Next, we watched the film *Black Panther*, and finished with the students completing surveys on their phones again. Here's what we learned from doing this at a number of universities. Viewing the film did indeed have a positive influence. Black teens who saw the film showed increases in their sense of well-being and empowerment after the film. Interestingly, other non-White students, including Hispanic and Asian students, also showed increases in well-being and empowerment after watching *Black Panther*. The number of White students (n=10) was too low to interpret their reactions definitively, though they seemed to follow a similar pattern. Similarly, regardless of race, the students uniformly said that they identified with the character Black Panther/T'Challa by saying, for instance, that they wish they were more like him[4].

DOCTOR WHO

At about the same time, in the UK, the long-running BBC television show *Doctor Who* was anticipating a demographic change. After seeing a dozen male actors play the main character "The Doctor," the show promised that the thirteenth Doctor Who would be a woman. To take the temperature of the fans, we recruited *Doctor Who* fans online (n=235; Dill-Shackleford et al., 2018) and asked them to complete our surveys. We asked them a number of questions such as who their favorite Doctor was (David Tennant, followed by Tom Baker) and how they felt about the Doctor becoming a woman. According to our findings, there was a definite trend towards emotional enthusiasm for the female Doctor. However, some fans weren't as enthused. We found that the higher the fan scored on measures of Social Dominance and Ambivalent Sexism (both benevolent and hostile sexism), the less positive they felt about the new Doctor being a woman. Was the point of asking these questions to label *Doctor Who* fans as sexist? No. The conclusions we drew from our data were different than that: Namely that most fans are open to, and even excited about, the first female Doctor. However, the more sexist you are, the less excited about it you are. On the other hand, for many fans, this was seen as an exciting time when a new female role model was emerging for both their daughters and sons.

THE STATS

For years, researchers have tracked the over-representation of young, White males in popular film and television. The University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative produces regular reports (see, for example, Smith, Chioueiti & Pieper, 2018) documenting, for instance, the demographics of main characters and peripheral characters in film. Year after year, groups such as homosexuals and people of color are underrepresented as fictional characters. USC-Annenberg encourages fans to follow #inclusionists on Twitter and Facebook, and asks professionals to add more female characters, more characters of color and more LGBTQ+ characters to their productions.

WE ALL SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE: THAT LANGUAGE IS STORY

You may be asking why we are talking about adding fictional characters of color, for instance, instead of talking about "real world" changes. For one thing, USC-Annenberg also tracks storytelling professionals (directors, composers, producers, actors) by demographics and encourages the hiring of more underrepresented individuals. But, for another thing, the people who populate our story worlds are also quite important because people in stories also count when we try to understand how the world works (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2019)

Story is more than a past time for people. It goes much deeper than that. Human beings are natural storytellers and we naturally learn through story (Beach & Bissell, 2016; Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2019; Gottschall, 2013). If you watch pre-school children playing, you will find them acting out stories. Our dreams are in the form of stories. When friends talk to each other, we tell

stories (Gottschall, 2013). Scientists now think that our very thoughts take the form of stories (Beach & Bissell, 2016). What this means is that, if you want us to most easily understand and remember something, give it to us in a story. This applies to stories about social categories like race, gender and sexual orientation. We might not think about it like this, but when there is a character from a racial group that has been stigmatized, the way we portray them on television is one way of telling a story about that group of people. Furthermore, television characters act as avatars. In other words, we see the world through that person's lens. If it is a lens of a different color, it helps us empathize with others in that group. The producers of the award-winning children's television program *Sesame Street* understood this. This is why *Sesame Street* was populated by people (and monsters) of color in a greater proportion than even in the US population. Those of us who grew up with the original *Sesame Street* cast remember Luis and Maria, Hispanic characters, and Gordon and Susan, African American characters. On *Sesame Street*, members of different racial and ethnic backgrounds lived side-by-side with Muppets in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors.

Why is the interaction on the screen between different races of people important? It's important because of what social scientists have learned about the contact hypothesis and the extended contact hypothesis. The contact hypothesis says that, as long as certain conditions are met, having interactions with members of other racial groups can break down stereotypes. The conditions that need to be met include things like fostering equal-status interactions and seeing the people from other groups as being typical of people in their racial group. Furthermore, when people of different ethnic backgrounds have to depend on each other, for instance, if they have to meet mutually-beneficial goals

together, then that tends to erode stereotypes.

The extended contact hypothesis applies to media because it says that if we see or hear about members of our own (e.g., racial) group being friends with members of another group, that tends to reduce prejudice. *Sesame Street* offers many excellent examples of this: If we are White, and we see that Bob (who is White) has friends and neighbors like Luis, Maria, Gordon, and Susan, then, by extension, this teaches White kids that they can be friends with Hispanic and Black people as well. And, yes, this really does make a real difference in people's lives. Notice that when children see that Bob and Luis are friends, the younger ones do not know that the friendship takes place in a fictional world. What's harder to understand is not that the younger children believe in the fictional world, but that the older children and we adults are aware of the fact that *Sesame Street* is a fictional world. However, there remains a reality of their friendship in our minds nevertheless. It is common for fans of a particular fictional television show to be interested in the characters' off-screen friendships. For example, when a well-loved television show is cancelled, fans often ask if the actors will remain friends. Those fans who also follow the actor's life may understand that the actors may or may not be friends, even if the characters are. For example, *Psych* is a long-running television show from the USA Network with 2 best friends, played by the actors James Roday (who is White) and Dulé Hill (who is Black). When *Psych* finished its run, the actors were often asked by fans if James and Dulé would still see each other and still be friends. This was important to many fans. This happens on many beloved shows. And it does show that the line between screen life and real life is very blurry.

From TV shows to films and YouTube videos, real people "often search for the real-world point" of stories (Ger-

rig, 1993, p. 201). Psychologists have called fiction a social simulation (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2019; Mar & Oatley, 2008).

USING STORY TO RAISE ISSUES

Rassmussen and colleagues (Rasmussen, 2016) found that when preschool-age children watched the American public television program *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* and then had conversations with a parent regarding the situations on the program, the children exhibited more confidence in social situations, were better at reading the emotions of others, and were more likely to empathize with others' emotions. These are the same social responses that are used to measure readiness for children to start kindergarten in the US. In this study the researchers emphasize that for preschoolers the social lessons from *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* were most effective when paired with parent-led discussion – meaning that the narrative example served as a foundation for learning and modeling.

So, putting yourself into the shoes of a character who is different from you can build empathy for that character. For years, White characters and men have typically been our heroes and main characters. Recent examples such as *Wonder Woman, Black Panther* and the first female to play the Doctor in *Doctor Who* are signs that the old rules for character demographics are changing.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have reviewed some of the reasons why what children see on their screens in terms of ethnicity and other social categories makes a difference in their real lives. I mentioned several reasons this is true. For those who are designing children's programming, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Representations of people from a variety of races can be a bridge to greater racial understanding.
- Avoid tokenism by presenting members of stigmatized racial groups as being authentic human beings, complete with strengths and weaknesses (Dill & Burgess, 2012).
- Know that people naturally learn through story. If your story has a message that fosters racial justice, it may help viewers consider those positions.
- Friendships between characters of different races that are presented in authentic ways teach viewers that such relationships can be valuable in real life.
- Don't hesitate to make a member of a stigmatized group the lead in your stories. ■

NOTES

¹ LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian (L), Gay (G), Bi (B), Transgender (T), Queer (Q) and more (+).

² For a discussion with many examples, see the book Finding Truth in Fiction (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2019; in press)

³ See also LEADprogram.org [8.10.18]

⁴ Averaging 4 on a scale of 1 to 5 on identification

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